DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 384 CS 203 853

AUTHOR Farrell, Edmund J.
TITLE What Should We Be Teaching in English?
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (67th, New York City, November 24-26, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Career Education; *Current Events; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; Functional Illiteracy; Higher Education; Poverty Research; *Racial Discrimination; Social Factors; *Social Problems; Testing Programs; World Problems

ABSTRACT

Designed to provide a context for English teachers' deliberations on what they should be teaching, this paper provides excerpts from 21 news items pertaining to significant educational and social events and trends. The news items deal with a wide range of topics, including the back-to-the-basics movement; the trend toward state-mandated programs of minimal-competency testing; recent findings about functional illiteracy among young adults; indications of a waning national commitment to the education of minorities; continuing discrimination suffered by blacks and other minority groups; issues related to career education; recent increases in the number of children whose families fall below the poverty line; and facts that point up the need to teach students about the urgent problems facing the world today. (GW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED149344

What Should We Be Teaching in English?

Edmund J. Farrell

I trust that none of you are under the misapprehension that I intend to answer the question "What should we be teaching in English?". Even if I knew the answer, I'm not sure I'd share it, since it would spell an end to NCTE, its many publications, its affiliates, its regional and national conferences, my job, the group grope we call a national convention, and the annual opportunity to spend Thanksgiving dinner with your unnamed sponsor. I have been assured by Jim Sabol, chair of secondary section, that the overriding question of this gathering is "What should we be teaching in English?", and that the 15 questions and the issues they subsume, questions and issues to which you are to address yourselves in small groups, are all subsets of that overriding question. In short, the degree to which we discover answers at this gathering will be more your responsibility than mine. What I would like to do is to present a series of items, seemingly incoherent, which I hope will provide a partial context for your deliberations. Most of what I have to say will have been culled from past issues of Council-Grams, a publication which, in its incoherence, reflects the society in which we live, the schools in which we earn our keep, and the subject which we profess to teach.

ITEM: At the Conference on Emerging Trends in Educational Policy, sponsored in September by the Hudson Institute, prediction was made that whatever else happens during the next five to ten years, elementary and secondary education will be most heavily influenced by falling enrollments, tighter finances, and renewed interest in the teaching of basic skills.

ITEM: According to Ben Brodinsky, former editor-in-chief for Croft Educational Services, the back-to-basics movement includes these characteristics, among

CS203853

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Edmund J. Farrell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

others: Emphasis is to be on reading, writing, and arithmetic in the elementary grades, with most of the school day to be devoted to these skills. Phonics is the method advocated for reading instruction. In the secondary grades, most of the day is to be devoted to English, science, math, and history, taught from "clean" textbooks, free of notions that violate traditional family and national values. Methodology is to include drill, recitation, daily homework, and frequent testing. Promotion from grades and graduation from high school are to be permitted only after mastery of skills and knowledge has been demonstrated through tests. Electives are to be eliminated, and the number of required courses is to be increased.

item: By the beginning of this month, 40 states had either mandated programs of minimal competency testing for high school graduation or were considering doing so.

ITEM: In a speech delivered in October at the opening session of the annual conference of the College Entrance Examination Board, Joseph Califano, secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, announced that the National Academy of Sciences will undertake a "major" new study of standardized tests; that HEW will provide "broad support" for groups like the Education Commission of the States, which aid states in establishing assessment programs; that a Committee on Testing and Basic Skills will be established by the National Academy of Education; and that the National Institute of Education will undertake a "major" study of why some students do not perform well on tests. In his remarks, Mr. Califano strongly opposed any federally developed, federally financed, mandated national testing programs.

ITEM: Forty-seven percent of the nation's 17-year olds do not know that each state has two U.S. senators. One of every two students at ages 13 and 17 believes that the president can appoint members of congress. Twenty-nine percent of 17-year-olds do not know that local governments usually operate public schools. These were among findings released last January by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

ITEM: A study funded under the Adult Education Act found that 49 percent of those 18 to 29 years old did not know that each state has two senators, and that 28 percent could not determine the amount of change due them by subtracting the cost of a purchase from a $20 bill. Sixteen percent of the white population were in the lowest category of "cope-ability," compared with 44 percent of blacks and 56 percent of Spanish-surnamed persons.

ITEM: In an assessment of the functional literacy of 18-year olds, the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that 42 percent of black students tested are still functionally illiterate, although the figure is 5 percent less than it was in 1971. Functional literacy was defined by Right to Read, which cooperated in the survey, as being able to perform tasks like reading newspapers and taking a test for a driver's license.

ITEM: In a recent seminar at USOE headquarters, Harold Howe, denied that standardized tests are culturally biased. "It's not a matter of the test but of opportunity." He added that despite federal and state efforts in the 1960's to equalize educational opportunity for minorities, "We have not yet found a way to give persons on the lower rungs a fair shot."

ITEM: In regional seminars held last spring to draw attention to critical problems in the education of minorities, leaders of the two sponsoring organizations--Educational Testing Service and College Entrance Examination Board--reported indications of a waning national commitment to the education of minorities. Speakers cited the development of strategies in higher education to limit numbers of minority students; the growing reluctance of private colleges to raise funds to help minority students; deep resistence within the society to further integration; and an increase in the number of persons willing to sue to prevent programs for minorities. In a story appearing in the New York Times on July 3, David E. Rosenbaum reported that the average income of black families remains 40 percent below that of whites. Although 92 percent of black school children in the South attended integrated schools by 1972, well over half of the black children outside the South now attend schools at least 90 percent black. Because of sizeable black majorities in the public schools of the nation's largest cities, desegregation has become politically difficult if not logistically impossible, according to Mr. Rosenbaum. In New York, the public schools are 67 percent non-white; in Chicago, 70 percent; in Philadelphia, 62 percent; in Detroit, 81 percent; in Baltimore, 75 percent; and in Washington, D.C., 96 percent. According to Professor Diane Ravitch of Teachers College, Columbia University, minority children are the majority of those enrolled in the public schools of 20 of the nation's 30 largest cities.

ITEM: In August the unemployment rate of blacks rose to 14.5 percent, the highest since World War II and 2.4 times the unemployment rate for whites. Among 16- to 19-year olds, the unemployment rates for blacks was 40.4 percent; for whites, 14.7 percent. A recent survey conducted by Louis Harris and Associates found that 66 percent of blacks polled feel they are discriminated

against in wages paid; only 21 percent of whites agree. Seventy-six percent of blacks believe they are discriminated against in obtaining white-collar jobs; only 31 percent of whites agree. Seventy-three percent of blacks feel they are discriminated against in obtaining skilled labor jobs; only 26 percent of whites agree. Seventy-one percent of blacks believe they are discriminated against as human beings; only 28 percent of whites agree.

ITEM: In the September 11 issue of the New York Times, David Vidal reports that Puerto Rican families in the United States fare worse economically than any other ethnic group. Figures from the Bureau of the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed in 1975 that 7.6 percent of Puerto Rican families renting in New York City had annual incomes of less than $2,000, as compared to 5.6 percent of black families; 38.1 percent of Puerto Rican families earned from $2,000 to $4,999 annually, as compared to 28.8 percent of black families; only 4.5 percent of Puerto Rican families earned above $15,000 as compared to 13.2 percent of black families.

ITEM: Results of the first survey of career and occupational development conducted between 1973-74 by National Assessment of Educational Progress show that 44 percent of American 17-year olds desire a professional career, although census figures indicate that only 20 to 25 percent of existing jobs are professional or managerial. Further, only 54 percent of the 17-year olds could correctly answer five questions about the amount of training needed for a specific, commonplace job.

ITEM: In October, 1976, Edward B. Fiske, education editor of the New York Times, told 1,200 vocational educators meeting in Minneapolis that the liberal arts

have always had a strong vocational strain. Intense study of the classics during the 18th century, Mr. Fiske observed, was "purely vocational" in that it taught one "how to be an aristocrat." Mr. Fiske told participants to concentrate on providing students with skills needed to get along in society. "Vocational education must serve the whole person," he said, and must be student, not institution, oriented. Willard Wirtz, former secretary of labor, told those in attendance it would be a mistake for educators to train young people only to get a first job, as most people will have several different jobs during their lifetimes and more leisure time as well. Further, it would be a mistake to continue the separation of the liberal arts and vocational education by tracking students into strictly vocational curriculums. A mixture of academic and vocational education should be available to everyone, along with opportunities to interrupt schooling to explore career alternatives, Mr. Wirtz concluded.

ITEM: In its first major study of career switching, the U.S. Department of Labor found that nearly one in three American workers changed careers during the five-year period from 1965 to 1970. According to the study, based on the 1970 census, approximately 32 percent of the men and 27 percent of the women had switched careers.

ITEM: "Rally 'round the Workplace: Continuities and Fallacies in Career Education," an article in the Winter 1976 issue of Harvard Educational Review, asserts that much-publicized efforts to link education more closely to work constitute a "hollow, if not invidious, reform." Written by W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, the article declares, "Despite its assertions to the contrary, [career education] is primarily a renewal and expansion of vocational education, a movement that has previously proven itself ineffective

in reducing the gap between rich and poor, in enhancing school learning, in solving social and economic problems, and in improving the status of physical work." Dr. Grubb and Dr. Lazerson challenge the assumption that the horizons and self-images of students can be broadened through exposure to "real work." On the contrary, say the authors, "most work is boring. Its unvaried routine, the simplicity of most tasks, and the constant supervision characteristic of hierarchical settings all deny workers a sense of competence and feeling of responsibility."

ITEM: After reviewing 1,275 career-education products from 191 commercial publishers and distributors, the Education Products Information Exchange (EPIE) rejected 717, or 56 percent, because they were too old (pre-1971) or because they did not contain sufficient awareness of the world of work. EPIE then asked the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) to check the materials for racist connotations. Of 100 products the Council randomly chose to review, "Without exception, all of the material fell short of the active anti-racist approach the CIBC review team feels is needed if patterns of institutional racism are to be obliterated." Minorities were "often" stereotyped in appearance and behavior. They were "usually" shown being supervised or taking directions (never shown supervising white workers), "virtually never" shown as thinkers, planners, or highly skilled workers, and "often" shown serving white people but "virtually never" shown being served by whites. This servile posture of minorities was "the clearest indicator of a pervasive racism within career education materials." A team from Women on Words and Images in Princeton examined many of the elementary and secondary school materials and found they contained five times as many occupations for males

as for females. In addition, of 9,456 illustrations counted, 68 percent showed males only.

ITEM: After a four-year study of families and children, a committee of the National Research Council concluded that America's children are in trouble and that the trouble is getting worse. Five million children under the age of 6 Live in families receiving less than half of the medium income for a family of four, and three million preschool children--one of every six--live below the poverty line. In short, nearly 30 percent of America's youngest children live in families sorely in need of money. While the panel conceded that money cannot buy a loving environment, "nothing else will work without it." The panel also pointed out the special needs of one-parent families. Today more than 1 in every 6 children under 18 lives with just one parent; in 1950 the ratio was 1 in 12. Moreover, most single parents work: nearly three-fourths of mothers with children from 6 to 17 have jobs, while more than half of those with youngsters under 6 are employed. Classifying nearly four million preschool children as "high risk" because of the combination of low income and the absence of one or both parents, the panel recommended strongly that every family be guaranteed enough income that one parent could spend full time caring for children under the age of 6. For parents who nevertheless wish to work, there should be, according to the panel, improved child care programs so that young children have an opportunity to form stable emotional relationships with an adult. The panel concluded that without outside financial support, "It seems likely that the problems faced by families and children will increase in severity and that the rates of child abuse, crime, drug dependency, failure in school, and other indicators of our inattention" will also mount.

ITEM: After interviewing representatives of more than 60 education and community organizations, a curriculum development task force sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE) decided that organizations are more concerned about who makes curricular decisions than about what is actually being taught. the task force found little agreement across the country on how curriculum development could best be accomplished and no clear idea of who is doing what, where, and why. According to its report, "[The] concern for involvement . . . is accompanied by a feeling of impotence, of not being heard, and of having only a limited scope of influence. There is also the view, rather widely held, that somebody else or some other group controls the ballgame, be it professionals, bureaucrats, or some ubiquitous single 'they.'"

ITEM: When NEA surveyed its membership last year, it found the average teacher to be 33 years old, compared to 41 in 1961. The percentage of teachers with 20 years or more of experience had declined from 21.4 percent in 1966 to 14.1 percent in 1976. Only 60 percent of the respondents said they planned to remain teachers until retirement, while 62 percent were not sure they would choose a teaching career if they had to do it over again. Terry Herndon, executive director of NEA, ascribes the drop in the average age of teachers not to new teachers having been hired, but to older teachers having left the profession "in droves."

ITEM: This year 37 percent of those participating in the annual Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools rated the schools A or B in quality, a drop of 9 percent since 1974. But of those polled who had children enrolled in public schools, 54 percent rated the schools A or B, an increase of 4 percent over last year.

ITEM: We live in a world in which 6 nations have blasted an atomic bomb or device, in which 21 nations are capable of making an atomic or nuclear bomb within five years if unaided, or less if aided; in which Russia and the United States control 9.5 billion tons of strategic nuclear fire power with intercontinental range, the equivalent destructive force of roughly 20 tons of TNT for every Russian and American man, woman, and child. On this same issue, Alfred Kazin wrote in the September issue of Esquire:

> Anyone who knows what is going on in our schools knows that the problem is not that students don't read classics (meaning Victorian novels) but that they think the world can't go under . . ., that the world is as mechanical and usable as switching on the lights and the TV set. Students do not realize how much human intelligence may be needed to save us from the catastrophes that our too practical intelligence has inflicted on us. Our world is so full of social diseases--environmental cancer, nuclear leaks and possible explosions, violent collisions, and, above all, wars, in an unending chain--that it should be the first task of intelligence at least to confront these horrors.

In leaving you with the onus of making some sense of my disconnected discourse, I am reminded of an assignment that Professor Bertrand Evans used to give students in his advanced composition course at the University of California, Berkeley. He would list on the board three unrelated factual statements and then ask the students to incorporate the three statements into a coherent paragraph without using any one of the statements as the topic sentence. I'm also reminded of an anecdote that Joseph Califano shared with those attending

the College Board meeting in San Francisco last month. Mr. Califano confessed that when he was serving as assistant to President Johnson, he had fired Peter Benchley from the staff of the President's speech writers. Apparently Mr. Benchley had the responsibility of writing many of the speechs the President delivered in the Rose Garden to visiting Girl Scouts, PTA groups, National Spelling Bee Champions, and the like. These speeches, known as "Rose Garden Graffiti," were delivered as frequently as six times a day, depending upon how many visiting firemen were in town.

Well, Mr. Benchley did not take his craft seriously, and Mr. Califano discharged him. But before he left, Mr. Benchly wrote one final speech, which the President was to deliver in the Rose Garden to a group of foreign correspondents, a more auspicious group than usually presented itself for a few words from the Chief. Mr. Johnson began reading from cue cards held by a flunky out of sight of the television camera. As I recall, the last speech drafted by Mr. Benchley went something like this:

> There are those who say we cannot have guns and butter, that we cannot wage war in Viet Nam and maintain an affluent society. I say it can be done, and I intend to tell you how.
>
> There are those who say we cannot integrate the races and preserve peace in our society. I say it can be done, and I intend to tell you how.
>
> There are those who say we cannot fully employ our citizens and, at the same time, end inflation. I say it can be done, and I intend to tell you how.
>
> Lyndon, you're now on your own.